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The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War And The Remaking Of The American Middle Border

Dan Crofts

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Review

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Phillips, Christopher *The Rivers Ran Backward: The Civil War and the Remaking of the American Middle Border*. Oxford University Press, \$34.95
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Dividing the West

The American West once flanked both sides of the Ohio River and the upper Mississippi. Its peoples shared a regional identity and they intermingled freely. Abraham Lincoln and Mary Todd, both born in Kentucky, met and married in Illinois. Joshua Speed, a Kentuckian who lived for a time in Illinois, became Lincoln's best friend. These three and many more regarded Kentucky's Henry Clay, "Harry of the West," as the greatest political leader of the era.

But the antebellum West was torn apart by the Civil War. *The Rivers Ran Backward* explains how the "middle border region" fractured (12). Focused on the two border slave states, Kentucky and Missouri, and on the central and southern regions of the "Old Northwest"—Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—this splendidly-researched book demonstrates that any common Western identity was lost amid enormous wartime convulsions.

Kentucky's and Missouri's whites found themselves ground between contending armies once the fighting started. Majorities initially supported a war to restore the Union and many volunteered accordingly. But "military occupation" upended the lives of the loyal and the disloyal alike. A "war within the war" created insecurity for all. The Union army increasingly used "hard-line tactics" against suspected rebels, while "merciless guerrillas" retaliated in kind against white Unionists, free blacks, and slaves (155, 167-70). The book's cover reproduces "Order No. 11," artist George Caleb Bingham's grim portrayal of Union troops marauding among Missouri civilians.

When the war for Union became a war for freedom, it pulled the rug out from under pro-slavery Unionists. In Kentucky especially, emancipation

“strengthened a struggling southern nationalism, previously stunted by reflexive unionism and Confederate invasions” (212). Black enlistments in the Union army triggered “white retributive anger” and “overt racial warfare” (294, 296). Kentucky, quipped historian Merton Coulter, “waited until after the war to secede from the Union” (331). In the early twentieth century the “commemorative power of the middle border’s Lost Cause” produced a prodigious 350-foot-tall obelisk in the Kentucky town where Jefferson Davis was born (315).

Phillips’ expert command of Kentucky and Missouri history enables him to analyze incisively the war’s impact in the Lower North. He shows that many early white settlers in Indiana and Illinois had no quarrel whatsoever with racial bondage. Most notably, the repulsive John Crenshaw of Shawneetown, Illinois, used enslaved labor to manufacture salt between the 1820s and the 1840s. Accordingly, Phillips pushes back against the self-sanctifying postwar stereotype “embraced by residents of the modern Midwest,” who depict their region as always having been antislavery. Instead, white residents of the Lower North saw slavery as “a negotiable issue in American politics and society” (35-36).

This book shows that many volunteers for the Union army from Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois broadly shared the perspective of their counterparts from Kentucky and Missouri—they wanted to restore the Union, not disrupt slavery. A pronounced “backlash” against emancipation was especially notable among soldiers from southern Illinois. They “found themselves caught between competing nationalist fires.” Their “western nationalism” could not be reconciled with one that “equated opposition to emancipation with disloyalty” (230-31). But in the end they were unable to resist forces that were transforming the West into a North and a South.

Phillips is careful not to conflate estrangement from the Union cause in the Lower North with far more overt pro-Confederate tendencies in the Union slave states. Butternuts and Copperheads in Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois disdained overbearing Yankee meddling and rejected heavy-handed Republican Party efforts to insist upon emancipation as a key concomitant of the Union war effort. But far more tangible economic and social costs infuriated border state slaveholders. They blamed Yankees for taking their slaves away, and in so doing they became ardent Southerners.

Phillips relies primarily on a mountain of primary-source research and ventures only cautiously into disputed historiographical terrain. But his familiarity with the Lower North leaves him unable to accept James Oakes' idea that the Republican Party favored emancipation "before and during the early years of the war" (363n47). Phillips distances himself from Chandra Manning, who emphasizes the growth of emancipation sentiment in the Union army (396n52). Unlike Jennifer Weber and others who share her views, Phillips leans toward Frank Klement's conclusion that the Copperhead threat was "exaggerated by opportunistic Republicans" (411n59).

Phillips writes most persuasively about Kentucky and Missouri, the two border slave states of the Old Southwest. His coverage of Ohio, Indiana, and Illinois—the three adjoining states of the Old Northwest—emphasizes their pre-war affinities with Kentucky and Missouri. He tends to downplay the cultural and economic forces that were propelling the three northwestern states away from their slave state neighbors long before the war began. Yankees from New England and upstate New York always dominated the so-called Western Reserve of northeastern Ohio; by the 1840s and 1850s Yankees also were flooding into northern Illinois. Their presence unsettled existing political arrangements and prefigured the rise of the Republican Party.

Nobody would disagree with Phillips' view that partisan allegiances along the middle border did broadly pit Whigs, who wanted "an active and even interventionist government to promote economic development," against Democrats, "who regarded an invasive governmental presence at best with suspicion and at worst with outright hostility" (59). But Free Soil politics in the Old Northwest during the 1840s and 1850s appealed to Yankees from both the existing parties. Talented political entrepreneurs—most notably Abraham Lincoln—recognized the potential for a new political grouping that would bring those with qualms about the South or slavery together with those who wanted to expand mechanized commercial agriculture and build a modern transportation network.

This is not to say that the Republican Party of the 1850s posed any kind of direct threat to the slave system. Phillips notes that pioneering Republicans depicted their party as western rather than sectional. But most whites in Kentucky and Missouri viewed Republicans as bitter antagonists rather than as fellow westerners. Partisan ties that once stretched across the middle border were sundered. The sectional split apparent during the 1850s then became a chasm

during wartime.

Anne Marshall, Aaron Astor, William C. Harris, and Matthew Salafia each have offered recent books on the painful history of the border region before, during, and after the war. Christopher Phillips, already established as a leading member of this significant subfield, has now produced its most important and wide-reaching title to date. The *Rivers Ran Backward* deftly uses the lens of regional identity to make visible a transformation that has long been blurred or obscured.

Daniel W. Crofts has written extensively about the North-South sectional crisis that led to the Civil War. His newest book is Lincoln and the Politics of Slavery: The Other Thirteenth Amendment and the Struggle to Save the Union (University of North Carolina Press, 2016). His website is <http://www.danielwcrofts.com/> and he may be contacted at crofts@tcnj.edu